Priest

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A PROTESTANT'S WALK

THROUGH AN ORTHODOX CHURCH

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Truth can endure no falsehood, and herself finds those who seek her. But there is one condition: one must reject one's own opinion and prefer the Lord's, and seek not oneself, but God. It is no easy thing to leave off your former way of life and the things of which you were convinced, thinking you were on the right path. But it is those who are willing to do this that God calls His chosen.

This book is an actual conversation with a young Protestant, who himself approached an Orthodox passer-by one spring morning. Was he seeking the truth? What answers did the Orthodox Christian give him and how did he behave? Did anything change in their hearts after their dialogue, and who was proven right? The reader will witness their conversation and will hear numerous arguments grounded in Holy Scripture.

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A Protestant's Walk Through an Orthodox Church

The day, drunk with the springtime sun, was drawing towards evening. It was a Sunday during Great Lent. The Moscow streets and lanes, resting from the incessant noise of traffic, sparkled with little rivulets of melted snow. From the houses surrounding them and the still-barren trees there flew droplets, shining iridescently in slanting shafts, tinkling like millions of glass bells on the sakkos of the eternal High Priest.

I walked along the snug lanes of Shvivaya Gorka and Goncharnaya Sloboda, admiring the blindingly blue skies. In my soul there was a resonant silence at this suspension of the Great Fast.

Not far from the Taganka Theater, a young man approached me with a question:

"Have you read the Bible?"

Despite the fact that I am required to wear priestly clothing everywhere I go, such questions prove unavoidable.

"On occasion," I answered. "And since you also seem to be acquainted with this excellent Orthodox book, please tell me: what exactly in it so struck you that you immediately rushed into the streets of our city to preach new teachings?"

The young man was slightly taken aback by this unexpected question, but after a moment, opening his Bible, he answered with a stereotypical phrase:

"I used to be a bad person. My conscience tormented me, and I was afraid I would perish. But then I happened upon wonderful friends, who explained to me that there's nothing to be afraid of. Accept Jesus as your personal Savior, and you're justified. Paul writes about this: *But now the righteousness of God without the law is manifested, being witnessed by the law and the prophets; even the righteousness of God which is by faith of Jesus Christ unto all and upon all them that believe: for there is no difference: for all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God; being justified freely by his grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus* (Rom. 3:21–24)."

"Those are excellent words that you've just read," I answered. "And it's true that everyone who with Orthodox *faith which worketh by love* (Gal. 5:6) receives into his heart the grace which is given freely in the Orthodox Church is justified, that is, becomes righteous, by the power of God.

But, if I may ask, what church do these wonderful friends of yours attend?"

The young man named a certain well-known Protestant sect.

"Now, the Orthodox," he remarked, "have distorted Holy Scripture, worship idols, and in general are all people who haven't been reborn in Christ."

"It's unfortunate that you've fallen under the influence of *them which cause divisions and offenses contrary to the doctrine* (Rom. 16:17)," I answered. "But as your friends have accused the Apostolic Church which produced the Bible of distorting it, let's compare our beliefs."

"Let's do."

"I think you'll agree with me that we can judge our faith by its manifestations, for only God knows our heart, and we are powerless to plumb its depths. And what better expression of our faith could there be than the way we worship the Creator?"

"Yes, I agree with that entirely," answered the young man.

"Then tell me, what do you like most of all about your organization's worship services?"

"It's a church, not an organization," he snapped. "We play the guitar and sing nice songs, learn Bible verses, consider each other brothers, and rejoice that God has already saved us. Pure love reigns at all our services, unlike Orthodox services; eve-

ryone is joyful and jubilant. For me the services are a source of profound pleasure and a thorough knowledge of the Word of God. It's nothing like what you Orthodox have: you pray in an unintelligible language; if someone comes to visit your church he's completely ignored; nobody takes any interest in him or explains anything to him; old ladies scold him; you don't study the Bible; and in general all your churches, icons, and relics contradict the Scriptures."

"You've described your services very well," I answered. "But before you criticize Orthodox services you really need to try to live them, stand for a while and pray, and not go around bashing things you don't understand, like an over-zealous Communist Youth Party member. But let's get back to your worship services. I observed from your description that your services center around you yourselves — your needs and emotions. And yet, you must admit that you and I are earthly beings. Isn't that so?"

"Of course. But what's your point?"

"My point is that Divine Revelation clearly tells us: *If ye then be risen with Christ, seek those things which are above, where Christ sitteth on the right hand of God. Set your affection on things above,* ***not on things on the earth****. For ye are dead, and your life is hid with Christ in God. When Christ, who is our life, shall appear, then shall ye also appear with him*

in glory (Col. 3:1–4). The Lord Himself teaches us: *But seek ye first the kingdom of God, and His righteousness; and all these things shall be added unto you* (Matt. 6:33). Therefore, the central point of our worship should be the glorification of God and repentance before Him, rather than our own emotions and fellowship with one another. The main thing is life in Christ, not just words about Him. The Bible must be used for prayer, not as a reference book for looking up verses. And as for those who, like your friends, place the words of Scripture — or worse, their own interpretations of those words — at the head of the corner instead of God, the apostle Paul has this to say: *For ... many live as enemies of the cross of Christ. Their destiny is* ***destruction****, their god is their stomach, and their glory is in their shame* — could this possibly apply to Protestant rock bands? — ***their mind is on earthly things****. But our citizenship is in heaven. And we eagerly await a Savior from there, the Lord Jesus Christ* (Phil. 3:18–20). So your services contradict God's commandment. And doesn't Solomon the Wise say that *he that turneth away his ear from hearing the law, even his prayer shall be abomination* (Prov. 28:9)? Fear the judgment of God, and don't denounce the Apostolic Church which lives by Christ's Revelation."

Throughout my lengthy speech the young man kept trying to raise objections, but I asked him:

"Have I said anything that's not in the Scriptures? Haven't I described your services? Now you're trying to justify sheer lawlessness! But the Lord says through the Prophet Isaiah: *Woe to those who call evil good and good evil, who put darkness for light and light for darkness, who put bitter for sweet and sweet for bitter* (Isa. 5:20)."

My fellow debater then decided to move away from this difficult area.

"So you claim that we don't serve God correctly," he said. "Then prove to me from the Bible that the Orthodox pray to Him the right way."

"All right," I answered. "Not far from here there's an open church where the service will be starting soon. Let's go there, and with God's help I will try to show you that everything — our worship services, and the way the church is arranged — is completely scriptural. Don't think I'm trying to offend you. On the contrary, I want for you and me to come to a knowledge of the truth and, through the truth, to oneness of mind. For you and I must fulfill the Savior's commandment: *that they all may be one; as Thou, Father, art in Me, and I in Thee, that they also may be one in Us: that the world may believe that Thou hast sent Me* (John 17:21)."

"Agreed," he answered. "Try to convince me that all your churches, icons, relics, candles, and incense

don't go against the Bible. I don't believe you'll succeed!"

"That's wonderful that you've agreed. This is a sign from God that your heart is open to the light of the Gospel. And so, let's get back to what we've already established. We've seen from the Bible that the essence of worship services should be meditation not on earthly things, but on heavenly things. The Lord Jesus Himself said to the Samaritan woman: *But the hour cometh, and now is when the true worshippers shall worship the Father in spirit and in truth: for the Father seeketh such to worship Him. God is a Spirit: and they that worship Him must worship Him in spirit and in truth* (John 4:23–24). Therefore, all of our worship should have as its source the will of the Holy Spirit, and be fully in accordance with the Truth — in other words, accurately express the Orthodox faith."

"But why the 'Orthodox' faith specifically? Where is that word used in the Bible?"

"Well, do you think that being in accordance with the Truth means expressing a faith that incorrectly glorifies the Creator, speaking falsely against Him? Do you really think that heresy is pleasing to God? You see, the word 'Orthodox' came about in order to distinguish between the faith of the apostles and heresy. But there is also an expression in the Bible that served as the basis for this word. David

says: *The generation of the upright shall be blessed* (Ps. 112:2). And in the New Testament Christians are called the offspring of God (cf. Acts 17:29; 1 Cor. 15:23; Heb. 2:10–13). So even this word that was adopted by the Church to distinguish heresy is not foreign to Scripture. However, when we confess our faith in the Church, we call the Church one, holy, catholic, and apostolic, which is fully in accordance with the teachings about the Church expressed in Revelation.

"Well, all right. You've shown me that the true Church could also be called 'Orthodox,' although that doesn't mean that the organization that currently calls itself that is actually the true Church. But let's get back to how to properly worship God. How are you going to show me in practice that all of your worship services have the will of the Holy Spirit as their source?"

"A moment ago we agreed that a Christian should contemplate heavenly things rather than earthly. Christ said that the Lord, the Holy Spirit, *shall teach you all things* (John 14:26), and this includes the most important thing of all: how to correctly serve God and worship Him. Meanwhile, the apostle Peter says that the Spirit is sent from the Heavens (1 Pet. 1:12). Therefore, our worship services should also be of heavenly origin. Back in the Old Testament, God commanded Moses when he

was building the tabernacle: *And let them make Me a sanctuary; that I may dwell among them. According to all that I shew thee, after the pattern of the tabernacle, and the pattern of all the instruments thereof, even so shall ye make it* (Exod. 25:8–9). Although at that time they were only serving *unto the example and shadow of heavenly things* (Heb. 8:5), nonetheless, for God to accept the people's prayers they had to build everything according to heavenly criteria, not earthly. All the more so now, when Christ has come with *a greater and more perfect tabernacle, not made with hands, that is to say, not of this building* (Heb. 9:11), everything in our worship should be done after a heavenly model. Do you agree?"

"Yes, I agree with that. But what does that have to do with our discussion of Orthodox worship services?"

"Why, everything! I want to demonstrate that our liturgical life is founded on imitation of the heavens, and is therefore fully in keeping with Divine Revelation. Consequently, our faith and the Church are the only place where one can attain salvation, because those who don't serve God correctly cannot achieve eternal life."

"Fine. Try to prove that there are idols and churches in heaven, and I'll admit that one can be reborn in your Church. But why say that salvation can only be found in one place? Isn't it said that

whosoever shall call on the name of the Lord shall be saved (Acts 2:21)?"

"The demons also called on the name of the Lord," I replied. "But that didn't serve for their salvation (cf. Luke 4:34). Surely you don't really think that one can be saved without honoring God and serving Him?"

The young man, with obvious displeasure, agreed with me.

"Well then, let's get back to the topic of our conversation," I continued. "Let's see what the Bible says about churches. A little earlier we read that the tabernacle of Moses was made after a heavenly pattern. Obviously, then, there is a church in heaven. But in addition to these indirect allusions the Scriptures speak of it plainly."

"Where?" the sectarian asked with interest.

"In the Book of the Prophet Isaiah, chapter 6; and in Revelation: *And the temple of God was opened in heaven, and there was seen in His temple the ark of His testament: and there were lightnings, and voices, and thunderings, and an earthquake, and great hail* (Rev. 11:19). The holy apostle John was commanded to measure this temple: *And there was given me a reed like unto a rod: and the angel stood, saying, Rise, and measure the temple of God, and the altar, and them that worship therein* (Rev. 11:1). What need was there to measure the temple, if not

for the purpose of building New Testament temples after that pattern? And the people worshiping in the temple had to be counted to show that churches should be built to accommodate the number of parishioners, and not to a strictly defined size, as in the Old Testament. We'll come back to St. John's description of this heavenly sanctuary again, I hope ..."

"And why can't our houses of worship be considered built after a heavenly pattern?" the sectarian interrupted me. "I mean, we read the Bible in them; we glorify God there."

"In the Old and in the New Testaments the main difference between a temple and a house of worship is that the latter has no altar, which is the most important place in the temple. Dating as far back as Adam, it was pleasing to God to show His distinctive presence in the places where sacrifices were offered (cf. Gen. 4:4). It was by the altar that He revealed Himself to Noah (Gen. 8:20–21), to Abraham (Gen. 15:7–21), and to Jacob (Gen. 35:1, 7–15). He commanded that the tabernacle and the Temple of Solomon be built for offering sacrifices, and sanctified them through the manifestation of His uncreated glory in the form of a cloud (Exod. 40:34; 1 Kings 8:10). The Lord said of the Temple of Solomon: *I have hallowed this house, which thou hast built, to put My name there for ever; and Mine eyes and Mine heart shall be there perpetually* (1 Kings 9:3). The

Savior Himself prayed in this temple, calling it His Father's house (John 2:16). Then, in the New Testament Church, the holy apostles established the practice of erecting altars in churches. Here's what St. Paul says about this: *We have an altar, whereof they have no right to eat which serve the tabernacle* (Heb. 13:10). It's the same today — in the Apostolic Church the heart of a church is the altar. To this we may add that in heaven — which, as we agreed, is the pattern for our worship services — there is a mystical altar. St. John saw the souls of the martyrs beneath it (Rev. 6:9), and from this sacred place God reveals His will to the angels (Rev. 9:13; 16:7). The prophet Isaiah received purification from the heavenly altar: *Then flew one of the seraphims unto me, having a live coal in his hand, which he had taken with the tongs from off the altar: And he laid it upon my mouth, and said, Lo, this hath touched thy lips; and thine iniquity is taken away, and thy sin purged* (Isa. 6:6–7). Yet it's precisely this all-important object that is missing in protestant houses of worship, and for this reason they cannot be called biblical churches."

"You make a very interesting and convincing argument for why churches must have altars, but this raises the question: what kinds of sacrifices do you offer on it? After all, didn't Christ Himself offer the one and only sacrifice to God — His own Self? Do

you really want to somehow add something to the Lord's sacrifice?"

"Of course not! Who could be so foolish as to think that by his own weak efforts he could add something to Christ's sacrifice? It is within our power only to become participants in this sacrifice, just as in Israel: *are not they which eat of the sacrifices partakers of the altar?* (1 Cor. 10:18). Therefore, in the Orthodox Church also man becomes a partaker of the altar about which we were just talking through tasting of the true sacrifice. For *Christ our passover is sacrificed for us* (1 Cor. 5:7). And the following commandment of God will come to pass for those who do not partake of this New Testament Paschal sacrifice: *Even the same soul shall be cut off from among his people* (Num. 9:13). Christ Himself said: *Except ye eat the flesh of the Son of man, and drink His Blood, ye have no life in you* (John 6:53)."

"Ah, you're talking about your Communion." The young man waved his hand. "But that's just symbols, a remembrance. Only faith can save you."

"We already heard all that 2000 years ago," I answered. "Immediately after the Savior spoke those words, *many of His disciples went back, and walked no more with Him. Then said Jesus unto the twelve, Will ye also go away?* (John 6:66–67). In exactly the same way the Protestants, like the unbelieving Jews, say: *This is an hard saying; who can hear it?*

(John 6:60). But as Christ did then, so does He now insist that His words be understood literally. He gave no-one the right to interpret them symbolically! If in the Old Testament Israel was saved by eating an actual Passover lamb, is this replaced in the New Testament by merely thinking of the Lamb of God, Who takes upon Himself the sin of the world (John 1:29)? As for interpreting the expression 'to eat flesh' symbolically, this interpretation does exist. Job, being reviled by his friends, cries out: *Have pity upon me, have pity upon me, O ye my friends ... why do ye persecute me as God, and are not satisfied with my flesh?* (Job 19:21–22). Well, are we really going to have eternal life while reviling and mocking the Lord?!"

The young man, after some thought, agreed that his organization's interpretation was far from the truth. Meanwhile we had arrived at our destination — a small, elegant church, tucked away on one of the lanes adjoining Taganka Square. Looking up, my fellow debater gazed at the five domes on the church, then reminded me:

"You promised to prove that all these furnishings are in keeping with the Bible."

"Certainly. I haven't forgotten my promise," I replied. "Through the ages the Orthodox Church has developed the type and form of church that we see here before us. And this was done so that the

Church could more fully impart heavenly realities through an earthly framework. The biblical descriptions of Moses' tabernacle and Solomon's temple greatly influenced the construction of Orthodox churches, although the Church has not slavishly followed the Old Testament examples, remembering that we are no longer under the law, but under grace (Rom. 6:14). So then, where should I begin my explanation of the meaning of the church and its components?"

"Well, I see that there are crosses on the cupolas. But the cross was the instrument used to put the Son of God to death, and the Bible says that *cursed is every one that hangeth on a tree* (Gal. 3:13). Yet you display this accursed gallows tree for all to see, and even worship this idol!"

"Forgive me," I replied. "But whom do you personally consider yourself by confession? Do I have the misfortune to be talking with a deicide — a Jew? For it is the Jews who call the Lord Jesus cursed, and the words that you quoted do not speak of the cross, but rather of the One Who hangs on it. If you consider the cross to be the instrument of a curse, then for you the God-man will indeed be a curse. Yes, the cross was once the instrument of a curse, but when God died on it the cross became our glory. The text that you quoted is framed by these words: *Christ has redeemed us from the curse*

of the law, being made a curse for us: for it is written, Cursed is every one that hangeth on a tree: That the blessing of Abraham might come on the Gentiles through Jesus Christ; that we might receive the promise of the Spirit through faith (Gal. 3:13-14). And the following words of the apostle Paul are fulfilled in the Protestants: *For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved* (and not who 'have been' saved) *it is the power of God* (1 Cor. 1:18). And so, if Paul's words are true — that through crucifixion on the cross Christ extended the blessing of Abraham and, through it, the power of the Holy Spirit to the Gentiles, that is, to us — then these words of Isaiah must also have been fulfilled: *And in that day there shall be a root of Jesse, which shall stand for an ensign of the people; to it shall the Gentiles seek: and His rest shall be glorious. And it shall come to pass in that day, that the Lord shall set His hand again ... And He shall set up an ensign for the nations* (Isa. 11:10–12). It is for this very reason that the Church of the Lord places its Bridegroom's emblem, the cross, over its places of assembly. The most-wise Solomon foresaw this when he spoke of the Orthodox Church as being *terrible as an army with banners* (Song of Sol. 6:10)."

"There's sense in that, I suppose," the young man reflected. "Though I still have a few questions

about your veneration of the cross. But now explain to me what your cupolas signify."

"We've just recalled the prophet's words about the Lord raising up His ensign. The temple is a symbol of the Church, and its head is Christ. The Orthodox needed to somehow demonstrate this truth, and that is why the church building is crowned by the symbol of the Lord and Standard-bearer: the cupola. This church has four more smaller cupolas — a symbol of the four evangelists, thanks to whom we have received the image and teaching of the Head of the Church, the Lord Jesus. In order to show the distinction of the disciples from the Master, the main cupola is covered with gold — the sign of the Kingdom and of incorruption, which is why the wise men brought it as a gift to the Christ-Child — and the cupolas symbolizing the evangelists are the color of a starlit sky, as a reminder of the words of Prophet Daniel: *And they that be wise shall shine as the brightness of the firmament; and they that turn many to righteousness as the stars for ever and ever* (Dan. 12:3). And who converted more people to the faith than the apostles? The cupola rests on a support called the neck. As you see, on one of these necks the apostles are depicted, and on the others — a special ornament that looks like a pair of wings. Here the church building itself hints at the meaning behind this part of it: the neck,

which connects the head to the body, is a symbol of the apostles and their successors, owing to whom the Orthodox have fellowship with Christ. As St. John the Theologian writes: *That which we have seen and heard declare we unto you, that ye also may have fellowship with us: and truly our fellowship is with the Father, and with His Son Jesus Christ* (1 John 1:3). And without the direct apostolic succession preserved by the Orthodox Church, fellowship with God is impossible — as in the case of the Protestants, for example, who don't have it, who think that God has forgotten His Church, and want to correct His 'oversight'."

"And what does the roof's strange design signify? Don't tell me that has biblical roots, too?" asked the young man, pretending not to have noticed my last words, which are usually an extremely delicate topic for sectarians.

"Of course it does," I replied, deciding not to force my fellow debater into a corner. "These corbel arches are called gables. Their very form, which resembles angels' wings, was intended to suggest their meaning. The Orthodox have firmly embraced the apostle's words: *But ye are come unto mount Sion* (this is why the church roof is shaped like a mountain), *and unto the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to an innumerable company of angels, to the general assembly and church of the*

firstborn, which are written in heaven (this company of angels and men is depicted by the gables), *and to God the Judge of all* (symbolized by the cupola), *and to the spirits of just men made perfect, And to Jesus the mediator of the new covenant, and to the blood of sprinkling, that speaketh better things than that of Abel* (Heb. 12:12-24; all this is contained in the Orthodox altar). In this way our churches portray the words of Scripture in the language of symbols. However, regarding this sacred text it is more important to point out that the Protestants are transgressors of this commandment: they do not approach either the saints or the angels in prayer, although the apostle speaks about this; and still less do they approach the Blood of sprinkling, for they shun the Orthodox Eucharist, and this Blood will condemn them on the day of Judgment, just as the blood of Abel condemned the murderer, Cain. Note that this element of church décor has its beginnings back in the Old Testament. Solomon *carved all the walls of the house round about with carved figures of cherubims and palm trees and open flowers, within and without* (1 Kings 6:29). You see on the walls of our church a continuation of this same biblical tradition. We've already spoken about the images of the cherubim — if you look carefully at the tile work, you'll see one of them there, as well — and as to floral decoration, this whole tiled wall is covered with it. It shows that

paradise lost is returned to us through what takes place inside the church."

"Your explanation is certainly impressive," the Protestant said thoughtfully. But then he suddenly added spitefully, "The grating over the windows, like the bars of prison cells — don't tell me *it* has a biblical origin, too!"

"I don't understand your skepticism," I answered. "Of course it does. *And for the house he* (Solomon) *made windows of narrow lights* (1 Kings 6:4). Just the same as the ones in this church — ours have shutters that let in a narrow light. The window is a symbol of the light of God's revelation, and the grating is a sign that it is not yet complete: *for we know in part* (1 Cor. 13:9). This symbolism is rooted in the Bible: *behold, he standeth behind our wall* (the Bride says about Christ), *he looketh forth at the windows, shewing himself through the lattice* (Song of Sol. 2:9)." Another ancient element in our exterior church furnishings is the columns which replicate the pillars of the tabernacle (Exod. 26) and symbolize the saints and angels through whose prayers the world exists (Gal. 2:9)."

"You've explained almost everything, but there's one thing more: where did you get the idea for the shape of your churches? I mean, why is the bell tower taller than the church, and the church itself taller than the altar?"

"Apparently you've already guessed that the division of our churches into three parts dates back to the Old Testament temple and tabernacle," I replied. "As far as the church shape itself, that dates back to the structure of Solomon's temple. The following examples are given in the description of the temple in Second Chronicles: *The length by cubits after the first measure was threescore cubits, and the breadth twenty cubits. And the porch that was in the front of the house, the length of it was according to the breadth of the house, twenty cubits, and the height was an hundred and twenty* (2 Chron. 3:3–4). And in another description given in First Kings it says that the height of the main part of the temple was 30 cubits, and the oracle, that is, the altar, was 20 [cf. 6:2, 20]. So we see that our Church has faithfully preserved even the proportions of the ancient temple. Now, admit that thus far we have not discovered a single instance of deviation from biblical revelation."

The Protestant was forced to agree with me. At this point the sound of a bell was heard from the bell tower, summoning Christians to the service, and I said:

"As when during the time of the Hebrews' wandering in the wilderness God commanded Moses to make two silver trumpets for calling the faithful together for whole-burnt offerings, and said *that they*

may be to you for a memorial before your God (Num. 10:10), in the very same way the Orthodox are summoned to morning and evening service to the Lord by the sound of bells, which for us have replaced trumpets."

"And there's a transgression of the Bible!" the sectarian said happily.

"In that case you are transgressors as well, because the Bible doesn't say to play on synthesizers. Unlike you, however, the Orthodox precisely fulfill the words of the psalm: *praise Him upon the loud cymbals: praise Him upon the high sounding cymbals* (Ps. 150:5). According to the faith of the Orthodox Church, the sound of the bell is linked to the uncreated power of the Godhead, and because of this it can drive away evil spirits, just as the sound of David's harp drove them away from King Saul (1 Sam. 16:23). Conversely, those who hear this ringing are filled with the grace of the Spirit, as it was with the prophet Elisha (2 Kings 3:15). For this reason many come to the church for the first time thanks to the ringing of the bells. The Protestants have none of this, and this is why they are forced to search constantly for converts, and still do not achieve the same results as the Orthodox. There is not a single nation that has been converted to Christianity by Protestants. This is not surprising, since without the aid of God's power people

are not able to truly receive Christ (1 Cor. 12:3). But now it's almost time for the evening service. Let's enter the church by the gates of which David sings: *Open to me the gates of righteousness: I will go into them, and I will praise the Lord: this gate of the Lord, into which the righteous shall enter* (Psalm. 118: 19–20)."

"Oh, so now you're trying to find a biblical basis for an ordinary door. I'm afraid that's a bit of a stretch."

"Now why do you say that? King Solomon made two doors into the temple (1 Kings 6:33-34), and in an Orthodox church every object has a spiritual meaning as well as a practical purpose."

We entered the quiet shelter of the church. Directly across from the entrance there stood a small table with burning candles.

"What sort of strange construction is this, and why are there so many candles on it?" asked the sectarian.

"This is a table for commemoration of the departed," I replied. "The candles are a symbol of our prayers for them. The Church burns incense before this table and offers prayers for our departed brethren. Just off to the side is where people put the donations they bring in memory of their loved ones. All this is an expression of our love which *never faileth* (1 Cor. 13:8), for *whether we live, we live unto*

the Lord; and whether we die, we die unto the Lord: whether we live therefore, or die, we are the Lord's (Rom. 14:8). This is why the Church believes that our prayers are greatly effective for the departed, who can no longer do anything for themselves."

"But how can you pray for the deceased when their fate has already been decided? After all, Abraham did say to the rich man: *and beside all this, between us and you there is a great gulf fixed: so that they which would pass from hence to you cannot; neither can they pass to us, that would come from thence* (Luke 16:26)."

"Of course the departed *themselves* are not able to change their situation, but this is still within the almighty power of Him Who holds *the keys of hell and of death* (Rev. 1:18); and He has told Orthodox Christians: *and all things, whatsoever ye shall ask in prayer, believing, ye shall receive* (Matt. 21:22). It is for this very reason that we implore Him on behalf of our brethren — all the more so since until the Last Judgment the fate of each person is not completely determined, or the Judgment itself would be pointless. And also, our Redeemer, *because He continueth ever, hath an unchangeable priesthood. Wherefore He is able also to save them* ***to the uttermost*** *that come unto God by Him,* ***seeing He ever liveth to make intercession for them*** (Heb. 7:25). We believe that His power knows no bounds, except for man's vol-

untary rejection of Him; and because of this the Church commemorates all its children except for those who openly opposed God and, in so doing, committed the sin of blasphemy against the Holy Spirit, which is not forgivable either in this world or in the next (Matt. 12:31–32). Incidentally, from these words of Christ it follows that the remission of sins is possible after death, as well. But I must warn you that if you remain in schism no one will be able to help you, since at present you are blaspheming against the Spirit Who abides eternally in the Orthodox Church (John 14:16)."

A grimace of displeasure crossed his face, and he hurried once again to move away from the delicate subject.

"All right, your praying for the departed makes sense, but why do you give alms in their behalf?"

"All Christians have received the commandment: *Be ye therefore merciful, as your Father also is merciful* (Luke 6:36); consequently, almsgiving greatly assists our prayers. Even back in the Old Testament the son of Sirach wrote: *A gift hath grace in the sight of every man living; and for the dead detain it not* (Sir. 7:33). Now, if you don't have any other questions for the time being, let's go a little further into the church."

"Why do you openly disobey God's commandment?" the sectarian asked me, pointing to the ho-

ly icons. "After all, it is said: *Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image, or any likeness of any thing that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth: thou shalt not bow down thyself to them, nor serve them* (Exod. 20:4–5). Yet you've filled your whole church with depictions of people and angels. This is a clear case of idolatry!"

"But doesn't it seem to you," I replied, "that since the time this commandment was given there have been a few changes in relations between God and man? Let's recall the fact that Moses himself explained the reason why it was forbidden in the Old Testament to depict God. He says: *Take ye therefore good heed unto yourselves; for ye saw no manner of similitude on the day that the Lord spake unto you in Horeb out of the midst of the fire: lest ye corrupt yourselves, and make you a graven image, the similitude of any figure* (Deut. 4:15–16). But since then several magnificent events have occurred. He who was Himself invisible became visible, and we, confessing this Truth in deed, depict God incarnate. *No man hath seen God at any time; the only begotten Son, Which is in the bosom of the Father, He hath declared Him* (John 1:18). And we show these wondrous tidings not only by word, but also by deed. You, on the other hand, cannot in any way prove your faith in Christ come in the

flesh, since you refuse on principle to depict Him. And in so doing you fall completely under the apostle John's definition of the deceiver and Antichrist (2 John 1:7)! In rejecting the veneration of icons you also deprive yourselves of the opportunity to fulfill the apostle Paul's injunction: *Let us run with patience the race that is set before us, **looking** unto Jesus the Author and Finisher of our faith; Who for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame* (at these words I pointed to the Crucifixion), *and is set down at the right hand of the throne of God* (I showed him the icon of Christ in glory) (Heb. 12:1-2). As far as I am aware, people look with their eyes, and this presupposes the existence of icons in the Church."

"This is not referring to looking with the eyes, but to looking with one's thoughts, with one's recollections," replied the sectarian.

"No, you're wrong," I said. "The following verse speaks of mental vision, but here we have no reason to depart from the literal sense of the biblical text."

"Well, all right, let's assume that Christ can be depicted. But why make icons of saints? After all, they're not gods. So what do these icons imply?"

"Saints are not gods by nature, of course; they are sons of God by grace (John 1:12–13). Their icons are a shining proof that Christ's labor was not fruitless. They received that same glory which the

Father gave to the Son, and which He passed on to the saints (John 17:22). Look at this icon of the martyr Paraskeva, for instance. Do you see the radiant light around her head? That is the symbol of divine glory, for *God is light* (1 John 1:5). And the path by which the saint reached God is indicated by the cross in her hands. For it is said: *And he that taketh not his cross, and followeth after Me, is not worthy of Me. He that findeth his life shall lose it: and he that loseth his life for My sake shall find it* (Matt. 10:38-39). And so St. Paraskeva took up her cross, lost her life for Christ, and found eternal joy. And we emulate their faith, *considering the end of their conversation* (Heb. 13:7), as the apostle exhorts us. By this alone it is clear that the Scriptures teach us to honor icons of the saints, and through their icons to ask them for their prayerful intercession, for *the effectual fervent prayer of a righteous man availeth much* (Jas. 5:16).

"However, the Bible also contains a direct command from God to make icons, given back in the Old Testament. You and I have already talked about there being icons of the cherubim in Solomon's temple, and that he did not make them arbitrarily, but was merely fulfilling the commandment given to Moses. *And the Lord spake unto Moses, saying ... thou shalt make two cherubims of gold, of beaten work shalt thou make them, in the two ends of the mercy*

seat (of the ark) ... *there I will meet with thee, and I will commune with thee from above the mercy seat, from between the two cherubims which are upon the ark of the testimony* (Exod. 25:1–22). From these words it is clear that God Himself commanded the making of sacred images. They are pleasing to Him in that through them He has revealed His will and worked miracles, just as He continues to work miracles through them to this very day. If you recall, at the beginning of our conversation we talked about the need for us to emulate heavenly worship. Now it is important to note that, even though the icons' prototypes themselves live in the heavens, there are icons there, too. After all, in the temple the apostle John saw the Ark of the Covenant, covered by icons (Rev. 11:19). In Old Testament times it was forbidden to depict people, because they had not yet been redeemed, and were not united with God. But now, when the righteous become equal to the angels in communion with God (Luke 20:36) and even their faces can become like the faces of angels (Acts 6:15), we naturally can and must depict the saints (bear in mind the apostle's injunction in Hebrews, 13:7)."

"Very well. You've proven that icons don't contradict the Bible. But why worship them when it is said: *Thou shalt worship the Lord thy God, and Him only shalt thou serve* (Matt. 4:10)?"

"Notice that it does not say that God alone is to be worshiped. There are different kinds of worship. Abraham bowed down before the sons of Heth (Gen. 23:12), and Jacob worshiped upon the top of his staff (Heb. 11:21). All this is called reverential worship. And it is this kind of worship that we render to holy things — icons in particular. An example of this kind of worship is given to us in the Bible: Joshua son of Nun fell on his face before the ark, which was an image of the invisible God and was covered with icons of angels (Jos. 7:6). David worshiped toward the temple (Ps. 5:8) and said that when he awoke he would 'be filled with the image of God' (Ps. 16:15). Even the very arrangement of the tabernacle presupposed reverential worship — lighting oil lamps and censing before the curtain covered with icons of the cherubim (Exod. 26:31, 35; 30: 6–7). Thus, the Orthodox Church is in all ways faithful to God's revelation! However, there is also another type of worship, called God-befitting worship or service. This kind of worship we render to God alone, and we only worship this way before the Holy Eucharist, for in it God the Word Himself appears to us in His Body and Blood!"

"And where in the Scriptures did you find a commandment to light so many candles and oil lamps, and to hang candelabras? Now, I know you're going to tell me about the lamp stand, but there was

only one for the entire tabernacle, and you have all these!"

"Yes, in the tabernacle there was only one lamp stand. Of course, one might also recall the fire which constantly burned on the altar, the model for the candles that perpetually burn in the churches. But besides that the Bible indicates many lamps which illuminated the temple as a symbol of the divine radiance illumining the heavenly temple. Solomon *made ten candlesticks of gold according to their form, and set them in the temple, five on the right hand, and five on the left* (2 Chron. 4:7). And the apostle Paul served the Liturgy in the upper room, where *there were many lamps* (Acts 20:8). Thus, in this, too, the Church has remained unchanged since apostolic times. But let's go up and examine the church sanctuary itself while the service has not yet started."

We approached the iconostasis, and the young man asked me:

"Can all this intricate ornamentation really have biblical roots, too?"

"As you've seen many times already — yes, it can. We've already talked about the curtain covered with icons that separated the holy place from the holy of holies. That same wall that connected those two parts of the temple first appears in the temple of Solomon: *And he built twenty cubits on the*

sides of the house, both the floor and the walls with boards of cedar: he even built them for it within, even for the oracle, even for the most holy place ... And he carved all the walls of the house round about with carved figures of cherubims and palm trees and open flowers ... And for the entering of the oracle he made doors of olive tree: the lintel and side posts were a fifth part of the wall (note the shape of the royal doors: it completely matches this description). *The two doors also were of olive tree; and he carved upon them carvings of cherubims and palm trees and open flowers, and overlaid them with gold* (1 Kings 6:16–32). If you look closely, next to the depictions of the four evangelists you'll see icons of the cherubim, as well. It's no accident that the apostles came to be depicted here, because it is precisely owing to their gospels that we are able to attain to eternal Life: God the Son, Who abides in our altars in His Body and Blood. And salvation became possible solely through the incarnation, accomplished at the moment of the Annunciation, which is likewise depicted on the doors. In addition, as testimonials to the reality of the incarnation, on the sides we see icons of Christ and His Mother. I should note that in heaven there is also a prototype of the royal doors. The apostle John saw this: *Behold, a door was opened in heaven: and the first voice which I heard was as it were of a trumpet talking with*

me; which said, come up hither (Rev. 4:1). Let us also now follow that voice into the earthly image of the heavenly sanctuary."

We walked up to the north doors, and I cautioned my companion:

"You may not and cannot enter the altar, for you persist in the mortal sin of heresy. The power of God may strike you if you enter the sanctuary while still being separated from Christ's Church. I would not like for the same thing to happen to you that happened to Nadab and Abihu, who offered strange fire to the Lord and were killed by His fire (Lev. 10:1–7), so I'll show you the altar through the doors."

Once I was sure that my companion was not offended by this attitude toward him, we opened the doors and I said:

"Now we can read the words from the Book of Revelation almost without commentary and point out the images of the heavens on our sorrowful earth. *And, behold, a throne was set in heaven, and One sat on the throne. And He that sat was to look upon like a jasper and a sardine stone: and there was a rainbow round about the throne, in sight like unto an emerald* (Rev. 4:2-3). Look at the high place and you will see the images of all these things. Here is the high throne on which the bearer of apostolic grace, the bishop, sits during the services, serving in the

image of God as one anointed by the Holy Spirit. And above the throne we also see an icon of Jesus Christ Himself sitting, surrounded by an emerald rainbow. *And round about the throne were four and twenty seats: and upon the seats I saw four and twenty elders sitting, clothed in white raiment; and they had on their heads crowns of gold* (Rev. 4:4). Next to the main throne you see the smaller synthronon, on which sit the presbyters — Greek for 'elders'. Above their heads there are icons of the heavenly presbyters — the holy fathers, who compiled a record for us of the apostolic liturgies."

"You see?" the sectarian interrupted. "You introduced something new besides what the apostles gave you. That means your Church is not apostolic!"

"That we have indeed introduced something that is not in the biblical texts does not mean that we have somehow distorted Revelation. Our Church is alive. It is a growing organism, and we cannot shackle it within the framework of the Bible alone. We are not servants of the letter which kills, but of the live-creating Spirit (2 Cor. 3:6), of Whom the Lord testified that He *shall teach you all things, and bring all things to your remembrance, whatsoever I have said unto you* (John 14:26). Therefore, the saints, guided by the Spirit, with each century add more and more riches to the treasury of the Church,

revealing in it what Christ gave to it in all fullness from the beginning."

"Well, now you've proven your unbiblical nature. We follow the Bible alone, and we need nothing more!"

"Of course; you don't even need the Holy Spirit! But if you're so biblical, then why don't you have any of the things we've just spent so much time discussing?"

An intelligible answer to this was not forthcoming. Then I continued:

"Let's go back to studying the heavenly symbols. We heard that the elders in heaven are not simply dressed in regular clothes, but in special robes. These robes are the model for the sacred garments worn by Orthodox priests, which your fellow believers reject. The gold crowns are symbolized by miters; these are worn by bishops and are awarded to presbyters. One of these miters, as you see, is at the high place. *Out of the throne proceeded lightnings and thunderings and voices: and there were seven lamps of fire burning before the throne, which are the seven Spirits of God* (Rev. 4:5). The words of God's Revelation proclaimed from the high place are an image of those voices and thunderings, and you see the seven burning lamps in front of you: the seven-branched candle stand. The apostle John saw a sea of glass, symbolized by the wash basin in the

altar, and four animals that are depicted both in the frescoes and on fans called 'ripidia'. If you return to the Church and participate in the Liturgy, you will hear the hymns that they sing.

"Now let's look at the main part of the altar — the altar table, or holy table. Even the apostle Paul talks about its existence in the Church (1 Cor. 10:21). Under the heavenly altar lie the souls of the martyrs (Rev. 6:9), and their bodies rest under its earthly representation — to signify the unity of the Church, both on heaven and on earth."

"And what do those coverings on the altar signify? Because, as far as I remember, in the Old Testament temple it wasn't covered."

"You're not altogether correct. If you'll recall, the main part of the temple — the ark — was covered with veils during Israel's wanderings, just like the rest of the sacred objects (Num. 4:5–15). The Orthodox do not consider this world to be their eternal home, and their entire life is a constant journey towards the Promised Land, towards Christ. It is for this very reason that our churches point towards the east and our altar is covered with veils, for we are still traveling. Also, the altar is a symbol of the tomb of Christ Who suffered, and so the covers commemorate the burial shrouds that were left behind after His resurrection (John 20:6–7). The most sacred object in the Old Testament altar was

the Ark of the Covenant. The evangelist John saw it, as well. We, too, have this sacred object on our altar table: that figure of a church standing there on it has as its main component an ark in which the Body of Christ is kept — the prototype of the manna (John 6:49–51) which stood before the Old Testament ark (Exod. 16:32–34).

"As you recall, the primary contents of the ark were the tablets of the law (Exod. 25:21), and in the heavenly temple He who sits on the throne had a book in His right hand that was sealed with seven seals, which were removed by the Lamb that was slain (Rev. 5). It is fitting that there be something similar in the earthly sanctuary, as well. And here you see lying on the altar table the Gospel of Jesus Christ — the new tablets of the law and the opened book of God's foresights. Besides these sacred objects, before the ark of the covenant lay the rod of Aaron which blossomed *for a token against the rebels;* to *take away their murmurings from Me* [God], *that they die not* (Num. 17:10). We, however, have on our altar an incomparably greater sign, the sign of the Son of Man (Matt. 24:30): the life-giving Cross on which God Himself established the new priesthood after the order of Melchizedek, which surpassed the priesthood of Aaron (Heb. 7). Our altar itself is sanctified by a successor of the apostles, who anoints it with ho-

ly chrism, just as was done in the Old Testament: *And thou shalt sanctify them, that they may be most holy: whatsoever toucheth them shall be holy* (Exod. 30:29)."

"And what about that table on the left? What's it for? And why is everything you have in Orthodoxy so complicated, anyway?"

"That table is called the 'table of oblation'. It is modeled after its Old Testament prefiguration (Exod. 25:23–30). The loaves of offering are continually offered on it to the Lord *for a memorial, even an offering made by fire unto the Lord ... it is most holy* (Lev. 24:7–9). In our Church they are called 'prosphora', and are brought to God in remembrance of Christians both living and departed. God has worked many miracles for the faithful through them. But this table's main purpose is the preparation of the bread and wine used for the liturgical Sacrifice. And Orthodoxy *is* complicated; after all, it was created by God in order to answer the innumerable questions of the human heart, wounded and immeasurably intricate, which God alone knows (1 John 3:20). In our lives, two chasms meet — the depth of the human heart and the incomprehensibility of God's mind. We did not invent Orthodoxy ourselves. It was given to us by Him of Whom David sang: *Thy way is in the sea, and Thy path in the great waters, and Thy footsteps*

are not known. Thou leddest Thy people like a flock by the hand of Moses and Aaron (Ps. 77, 19–20). For this reason we ourselves cannot revoke anything, *for who hath known the mind of the Lord? Or who hath been His counseller?* (Rom. 11:34). And I would advise you, too, not to anger God by your disobedience to His Church, for *are we stronger than He?* (1 Cor. 10:22). Rather, humble yourself under His mighty hand, and He will exalt you! But we should conclude our discussion, for he who is over us in the Lord (1 Thess. 5:12) has taken his place, and the evening service is about to begin. Let's both take part in this labor of prayer, which has now been performed in the Orthodox Church for four thousand years, since the time of the patriarch Isaac (Gen. 24:63)."

We walked down from the ambon and stood by one of the church's revered icons. At that moment the priest began vespers with the exclamation of the king and priest, Melchizedek: "Blessed is our God" (Gen. 14:20). Then a devout reader began on one note to sing of the wondrous formation of the world created by the Almighty, in the words of the prophet David (Ps. 103). After that, in imitation of the most wise King Solomon, the deacon pronounced the litany of peace (1 Kings 8:22–53), and the choir began to sing the ancient vesperal hymn of King David (Ps. 140; 141; 129; 116). Meanwhile,

the deacon performed the ancient rite of the vesperal censing of the church, established by Moses himself (Exod. 30:8), the prototype of which the apostle John saw in the heavenly temple (Rev. 5:8). At the same time the choir, in accordance with the apostle's injunction, instructed *in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody in your heart to the Lord* (Eph. 5:19) for all His great blessings and asking His forgiveness. Then, in fulfillment of Solomon's words: *the memory of the just is blessed* (Prov. 10:7), the choir sang hymns in honor of the saints, in whose congregation praise is sent up to God (Ps. 149:1). At the end of the chanting the royal doors opened wide, and the clergy, preceded by candles, performed the vesperal entrance, dating back to the Old Testament ritual of lighting the seven-branched candle stand every evening (Exod. 27:20-21), and the choir glorified Him Who is the true Light (John 1:9) in the words of the ancient post-apostolic hymn.

After this, the deacon chanted the great prokeimenon, taken from the 61st psalm:

Thou hast given me the heritage of those that fear Thy name.

From the end of the earth will I cry unto Thee.

I will trust in the covert of Thy wings.

So will I sing praise unto Thy name for ever (Ps. 61:5, 2, 8).

And the choir, imitating the heavenly order (Rev. 4:8–11), sang the first verse after each exclamation.

I explained each sacred action to my companion, and it was obvious that he was particularly touched by the words of the great prokeimenon.

As a sign that the time had come for repentance, the royal doors opened and the reader read one of the most ancient of Christian prayers: "Vouchsafe, O Lord, to keep us this evening". Then the deacon exhorted all the faithful to seek the Kingdom and its righteousness (Matt. 6:33), and the choir sang the 122nd psalm and the penitential hymns accompanying it. In them we were called to emulate the prayer of the publican, and to avoid the pride of the Pharisee (Luke 18:9–14). The reader reminded us of the nearness of death, of which sleep is an image. He planted in our hearts an example of a proper attitude towards this unavoidable event, pronouncing the wondrous prayer of Symeon the God-receiver (Luke 2:29–32). Having cleansed the mind of worldly desires, we joined in the hymn of the Seraphim (Isa. 6:3) and dared to call God our Father, pronouncing the words of the Lord's Prayer (Matt. 6:9–13). After this we called upon those who had already attained full adoption to pray as an aid to our intercessions. We appealed especially to her who prophesied by the

Spirit: *from henceforth all generations shall call me blessed* (Luke 1:48). We offered to her a doxology composed of the words of the archangel Gabriel (Luke 1:28) and Elizabeth (Luke 1:42-43). The presbyter lead us in entreating the Lord in the words of Saint Ephraim to deliver us from a spirit of sin and to grant us a spirit of virtue. After glorifying our Hope — Christ — and the Holy Trinity, revealed by Him for our edification, we left the church. Our road and the approaching evening were blessed by the name of Jesus which is a *strong tower: the righteous runneth into it, and is safe* (Prov. 18:10).

It was late, and we began to say good-bye. I advised my companion to make peace with God and to enter beneath the shelter of His wings — the Orthodox Church. He promised to think about it, and I sent him off with Christ's words: *search the scriptures ... they are they which testify of Me* (John 5:39); *I will build My Church; and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it* (Matt. 16:18).

* * *

Great Lent passed, and Pascha shone forth over the world. While going round the flower-bedecked churches surrounded by fragrant cherry trees and apple trees, washed clean by a fresh May thunderstorm, I happened upon a surprisingly beautiful little church in Zamoskvorechye. My heart led me to enter this wonderful house of the heavenly Bridegroom. Upon entering beneath the sweet-scented arches of the church, I saw a line of people waiting for confession with the priest. Suddenly, among those standing there I saw my erstwhile fellow debater. It turned out that, after some doubts, my acquaintance rejected his delusion, repented of his sins, and is now learning to live by God's commandments.

And [the Lord] *said, So is the kingdom of God, as if a man should cast seed into the ground; and should sleep, and rise night and day, and the seed should spring and grow up, he knoweth not how. For the earth bringeth forth fruit of herself; first the blade, then the ear, after that the full corn in the ear. But when the fruit is brought forth, immediately he putteth in the sickle, because the harvest is come* (Mk. 4:26–29).

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